

Fists of Ion

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Transgalactic Perspectus *presents an exclusive first look at the forthcoming autobiography of Lobar Aybock, Fists Of Ion: Memoirs Of A Champion Shockboxer with Chapter VII: Hard Raine.*

For the edification of our readers, a glossary of shockboxing terms:

clicker -- A strong punch originating from the midsection, targeting the opponent's chin (from the sound of the opponent's teeth clicking together).

CO -- Won by Count-Out, when opponent does not rise after a count of eight.

hub -- The shielded diamond shaped regulator set in the center of a shockboxer's breastplate which powers his armor and provides readouts to wedgeside doctors and scorekeepers.

hub-buster -- A strike at the opponent's *hub* with an ion-charged *shockmitt*, meant to disable the shield or, in the event of an unshielded *hub*, ionize the opponent's armor (resulting in an *IO*). A stunner to an unshielded *hub* has been known to cause nervous system failure.

DPR -- Disqualification by Physician's Ruling.

IO -- Ion-out.

phase -- The two-and-a-half-minute standard time period of action, broken up by one minute rest periods in which combatants retire to neutral vertices. There are ten phases in a regulation bout.

shockmitt -- The shockboxing gauntlet, fitted with rechargeable tri-cell batteries and a variable emitter which the boxer toggles with his thumb. It can generate fist-sized stun (blue), ion (white), or repulsor (green) fields. The fields are color coded to telegraph their nature to the opponent, giving a quick boxer time to counter-charge his mitts and mount an appropriate defense.

shockwire -- One section of bouncewire surrounding the wedge, randomly charged with a mild stun current at regular intervals throughout the phase.

vertex/vertices -- The three poled "corners" of the shockboxing *wedge*.

wedge -- The equilaterally triangular, Tuffweave-floored arena surrounded by a set of triple bouncewires in which a shockboxing bout is held

I step out of the refresher, having just showered off the sweat from a couple phases of holoboxing when Cus fills the doorway, looking at me with those black Chevin eyes that might be full of hope or doom for all I know.

This time it's doom.

"The fix is in, kid," he says. "I told Stitchy to pack our stuff and meet us in the alley. We're takin' a cab to the shuttleport."

There's no arguing with Eedund Cus when his mind's set. I do it anyway. He shuts me up with a story he got from Resik, the bartender at the Broken Tusk. Resik told him something about our contract Cus didn't believe, but after double checking, it's there.

"If you die in the wedge against Tull Raine," Cus says, "Torel Vorne owns your carcass. 'Says so right in the fine print."

He thumps the tiny datapad he's got with the back of his big hand and reads it for me;

"'In the event of death, all funerary arrangements to be overseen by the Reuss Corporation upon *mandatory* delivery of the cadaver.' Reuss Corporation. That's Vorne."

I'd seen Vorne at the weigh-in, a little blue-skinned, scraggly haired Reussi in an expensive breath mask and baggy clothes. He's a bigshot crook in the Portmoak Sector, based here on Reuss VIII.

"What the hell does he want it for?" I ask.

"Dunno kid, and I don't wanna find out. I expect Stitchy and me'll wind up part of the deal. Sorry, Lobar."

Cus knows that going up against Tull Raine, a Barabel champ, is the biggest fight of my life. He knows the stakes. He knows what it means to cut and run when a guy like Vorne's got his credits on the line. But what does staying mean with a cadaver clause in your contract?

We take the back hall and step out into the alley. The poison air makes my eyes water. Instead of Stitchy alone in a speederhack, the Gungan's sitting between a bunch of people I don't know in the back of an idle speedervan. A big Reussi with cropped hair, raingoggles and a poncho that could be hiding anything is standing there.

"Room for two more, fellas," he says, and nods for us to get in.

I know Cus'll go to fists if I do. He didn't get to be the Outer Rim's best trainer dumping spit buckets. But they've got Stitchy already.

I go in first. Cus slides next to me. The van sinks a half meter lower to the street. The Reussi slams the hatch. In a minute we're skimming through the city, staring at each other.

There's a little girl across from me, filthy in a worn *Boba Fett And The Assassin Droids* shirt. She might be Reussi. Next to her is an older guy, 100% human, with a mustache going gray and an easy way about his eyes. To his left is a slim, short-haired woman in coveralls who looks like she's waiting for you to give her a line so she can slug you in the face.

"I saw you IO Tontruk on Vycynith in the second phase," Mustache says. "They used to say nobody could beat an Esoomian."

"That's what they say about Barabels," I tell him. "Guess we'll never know."

"I'm not with Vorne, son," he says, flashing me an ID badge I don't recognize. "Major Bren Derlin. I'm with NRI."

"Who?"

"Rebels," grumbles Cus.

"We call ourselves the New Republic these days," Derlin says.

"Sha-nag! So long as there's an Empire, you're rebels," Cus says.

Here we go. Cus hates politics. He told me once he considered himself 'an unrepentant Separatist.' Whatever that is.

"Easy," I tell Cus. "What do you want with us?"

"We wanna make you a hero, kid," says Derlin.

He lays it on me.

When the Empire took over the Portmoak sector, Reuss VIII was a farming world. You wouldn't think it, 'cause now the only thing green bubbles in the gutters between the refineries and the tenement slums. They put the Reuss Corporation in charge of the planet and made every Reussi an employee from the plumbers on up to the seat shiners. The Corporation decided the real credits were in tech and durasteel, not food. Over the past twenty years they'd changed the face of the planet, swapping silos for smelters and blue skies for smog and killer rain.



At this point, the little girl breaks in, only she isn't a kid after all.

"The Rust Rats, the children scrounging through the dumps and stripping speeders, they're all orphans to the Corporation," she says, in a grown woman's voice. "Their parents' wages stay the same while the rent goes up. Nobody owns anything at the working class level."

"This is Mygo Skinto," Derlin says. "She brought all this to our attention a year ago."

"The Corporation started losing money because they couldn't compete with the bigger companies," says Mygo. "Torel Vorne took them in a new direction. There's a huge market for organs in the Core Worlds. Not enough donors to go around. Medical centers pay well. Some private citizens will pay even more and not ask questions."

"We investigated one of Vorne's offworld dealmakers," Derlin says, "a Reussi named Deral Reiko. Vorne has a system in place here we never imagined. The Corporation and Vorne work together to get the Reussi in debt -- gambling, high cost of living, whatever. Then Vorne's organization makes them an offer. Sell off your organs, provide for the younglings. A peculiar thing about Reussi anatomy, it's pretty adaptable. They hardly ever get rejected as donors."

"The more essential the organ, the better the price. The donor doesn't leave the operating table," Mygo says. "The children never see the money. They end up working for the Corporation and becoming the next generation of donors, or muscle for Vorne, if they go bad. The whole thing is self-sustaining."

"Meesa guessin,'" says Stitchy, who's been too scared to talk till now, "dis being what Vorne wanting with yousa, Red." Stitchy's the only one who calls me Red.

"You'd be right," Derlin says. "They've got you carved up already, kid. Every piece bought and paid for. Your lungs go to a Moff Ammar if you lose. The buyers'll be in the audience tomorrow night, on hand to collect. It's why Tull Raine's never lost a title bout. Vorne holds a private auction and ensures the challengers die in the wedge, so his best customers get a product in peak condition. You're the biggest haul he's ever put together. There's never been a near human challenger before."

Near human. Because Calians are red skinned, I get that a lot. The Imps taught me a saying; 'near human, not near enough.' I tell Derlin.

"Sorry," he says.

I don't know what to think, much less say. I'd heard Vorne owned a piece of Tull Raine, but I didn't figure how true that was, or that he was in the market for pieces of me. The whole thing has me feeling sick, like I'm in the wedge waiting for the buzzer to start a fight I know I can't win. I ask Derlin how Vorne pulls it off. I've studied Tull. He's fast for a Barabel, but he's not that good. He's been beat before, on the amateur circuit, but Derlin's right. Never in a title bout.

"Vorne has a slicer tap into your hub during the fight. He takes over your emitters, and lowers your shield. One stunner to the chest, you're out."

"Told you," says Cus. "It's a fix. Awright, thanks for the warning, Major. We're leavin.'"

"We've got a counter-fix," says Derlin.

The woman to his left straightens up like she's been bored up until now.

"Sergeant Dansra Beezer," she says, insisting on the rank the way some doctors do. She's pretty.

"What d'you do?" I say.

"Slicer," she answers. She's cool to me, but her eyes never stop looking.

"I thought all slicers were fat and light-sensitive," I say.

"And all shockboxers are brain-dead," she says right back. Funny.

"We can set her up on a remote terminal," Derlin says. "She'll keep the fight fair. All you have to do is win."

All I have to do is win.

This talk puts me in more of a mind to fight than ever. Hell, all I've ever been able to deal with is what I can break at the end of my fists. The Empire nabbed me when they bombed my hometown blue. They sent me off to their labs and poked and measured me till they decided Calians made bad stormtroopers, then unloaded me on some Zygerian slavers. I never got a chance to fight 'em. I guess I've been looking for a fight, a real fight, ever since. Derlin saying I'm the first near human challenger sparks something in me that Vorne almost put out. I don't like a rigged game and I don't like all this talk of cuttin' people up so some gray haired, fat pocket coreworlder can die a couple years later.

"What's gonna happen here?" Cus whispers to me. "You ain't thinkin' of goin' through with this, are ya?"

"This is our shot, Cus," I tell him. "We trained hard. Figure we oughta take it."

Stitchy moans.

Cus shakes his head and watches the factories speed by.

* * *

Eventually the speedervan settles outside the hotel and the Reussi slides open the door.

"Anything else you need from me?"

"I heard you always get a hotel relatively close so you can run to all your fights," Derlin says.

"It gets me jacked, you know? Ready."

"You running tomorrow?"

"Rain or shine."

Derlin nods. He shares a look with the little woman, Mygo. I don't know what it's about. I get out and help Stitchy unload our bags.

When the Reussi's about to shut the hatch, I think of something.

"Hey Derlin!"

"What is it, kid?"

"I want you to promise me something."

"They won't cut you up. I promise."

"Not that. Actually, I want her to make me a promise." I mean the lady slicer, and I look her in the eyes. "It's gotta be a fair fight. Both ways."

She looks at Derlin. I keep looking at her till she's back on me.

"All right," she says. "I promise."

I tell her thanks. She's looking at me differently when the Reussi slams the hatch shut. He nods at me before he climbs back in the cab and they go humming off down the busted street.

I feel like I'll never get to sleep. Cus yells at me and tips furniture. I holler back. Stitchy just sits in the corner with his head in his hands, his long ears drooping over his elbows, moaning.

In the end I tell them nothing's changed, except now it's gonna be the fight we thought it'd be. All Derlin did was let us know about all the garbage he's taking care of for us.

Cus throws up his hands and drags Stitchy out in the end, but he tells me, "See you in the morning, kid."

He's with me. I'm glad. I know Cus only bought my freedom 'cause he saw the fighter in me. He taught me to box, taught me Basic, and Aurebesh. It was an investment, sure, and it's not much of a basis for a friendship, but there it is. Him and Stitchy, they're all I got.

In the morning it's raining.

I lace up my Aleemas, slip a Roamer-6 over my face, and zip my exposure suit. You can't go out unprotected on a rainy day on Reuss VIII because the rain's acidic. You need a rebreather most days for all the stuff in the air, but when it rains the gutter sludge cooks and the fumes can sear your lungs. I think of that kriffin' Moff with a down payment on my lungs. I think about damaging the merchandise for him.

The pavement is sizzling when I step outside. You can hear it above the patter, like water boiling over on a hot thermoplate. Cus and Stitchy are already at the arena.

I've done this same run sixty-four times on a couple dozen worlds. I've run in snow and sleet and once, in a ball lightning storm. I've run through mud, and across sand so hot my shoes punched through glass. This is the first time I run in a hard, burning rain. I can see the smoke spiraling off the sleeves of my suit where the raindrops smack.

It's also the first time I don't run alone.

I expected the streets to be empty on a morning like this, but from the minute I step out of the hotel there's a shrill cheering.

Kids. Bundled up in dirty, piecemeal exposure suits put together from whatever they could scavenge, faceless little mummies in drooping hats and raingoggles and hand-me-down breathmasks gone green, huddled under rainshields improvised from sheets of scrap. Rust Rats, Mygo called 'em. I hadn't thought there were so many.

They sure know me. They're calling my name over and over in hoarse, muffled voices. They press around me, hugging my legs, touching my arms. I see goofy smiles through their masks. A pair of blistered little hands push a busted stencil into my fingers and I scrawl my name into a sparking datapad.



It's a helluva show, and hovering over their heads like oversized buzzbugs, a swarm of shielded holocam droids are there to capture it all for the HoloNet News, TriNebulon, and a bunch more.

Across the street, I see a single small figure in a beat up breath mask and a *Boba Fett And The Assassin Droids* shirt. She gives me a thumbs up.

I pound permacrete to the Dool Arena with the holocams whirring and buzzing to keep up. The cheers of those kids practically push me all the way there. Despite the driving, scorching rain, it's no work at all. My blood's up. I feel like I could IO Palpatine himself.

I shed my exposure suit at the backdoor to the Broken Tusk. I give it to some lanky kid and wave like a politician till I'm out of sight.

In the locker room Cus and Stitchy have already laid out my blue and white GolanGear armor. It's not the best, but it's hasn't glunked out on me in sixty four fights. I pray to Boz this isn't gonna be the first time. In another minute I'm suited up and Stitchy's checking the charges on my shockmitts, scanning the hub readout and checking my vitals.

Stitchy's the only name I know him by. He told us he used to be court physician to Queen Apa-something on his homeworld, but lost his practice when the Empire took over.

Most boxers use Emdees, but Cus won't.

"Never put your faith in droids," is all he says about it.

When we step into the hall, there's a sea of reporters pushing mics at me, asking me for predictions and making a big deal about me being the first (near) human contender and all that. I mumble some stuff about giving it my best shot when a gorgeous blonde hits me with;

"Fionna Flannis, Colonial NewsNet. Lobar, how long have you been aware of Torel Vorne's relationship with the Reuss Corporation, and can you confirm the rumors of an illegal organ donation trade?"

I do a double take, as do most of the other reporters. A tough-looking Defel working security makes a grab at her mic and there's a scuffle with her sound tech. He puts the shaggy nightmare out with some kinda hand stunner. It's the Reussi from Derlin's speedervan.

"We're just here to fight!" Cus bellows, and when a Chevin raises his voice, people get out of the way. We're off towards the arena proper at a jog.

"Derlin, heesa tink of everyting," Stitchy says.

The reporters don't follow. They're crowding the blonde scoop. The Reussi winks at us.

We come out to a roaring crowd.

We toured the Broken Tusk and the Dool Arena, but it didn't prepare me for the sight of the place at capacity. It's a tiered supper club, with the wedge set into a recessed pit in the middle with plasteel walls five meters high. Technically there are no bad seats. The pit floor's been opened up for the high paying fans. It's probably where the guys who've bought my organs are sitting.

Our guide told us the place used to have mixed fighting every night, till some Tolanese bounty hunter busted the place up and did away with the original owners. Vorne picked up the lease and remodeled the place, made it 'respectable,' which basically means too expensive for the locals.

Tull started right here in the Dool. This is his house, his crowd.

Sure enough, when we get to the wedge, I see Vorne seated wedgeside with his flunkies and a couple of rich swells, one a pasty faced fossil in a Moff's uniform eating Kubindi mudbugs and sipping Grada.

We stand in our vertex, and if I thought the crowd was loud before it's nothing compared to when Tull Raine steps into the wedge. Even the swells get out of their seats. He's tall, and black as space but for that mouth of sharp white Barabel teeth. He's in red Electrolast armor and the jewels of the Outer Rim Ponderweight Champion sash twinkle like wishes from his shoulder to his waist.

He does this thing where he charges up his mitts to maximum while the crowd chants his name, then busts out a flurry of whip-fast punches that sear white after-images behind my eyes. It drives the fans crazy till he brings his fists together in a thunderclap of feedback that even I gotta admit is impressive. I heard he beat a Jedi in the Dool once. I don't doubt it.

"That's right," mutters Cus. "Burn out yer mitts, ya *gug*."

The crowd shouts over my intro. I don't care. I'm not here for them. They get on their feet for Tull again and he holds up the sash before passing it to his Arconan vertexman. We meet in the center with the mediator, a Rodian who babbles the rules in Huttese. I look into Tull's black, reptilian eyes. It's like seeing a shadow grin.

"You're *prey*, redssssskin," he hisses.

What I got to say can only be articulated through my shockmitts.

We go to neutral vertices. The mediator vacates the wedge and activates the blue shockwire perimeter, the charge shifting to a different set of bouncewire every few seconds. I feel my armor fire up, scroll the field toggle in my shockmitts (blue, green, white), and dance back to the center.

I open the discussion with a couple quick ion zaps to his headguard. I catch him with one, but he bounces my fists back with a pair of repulsor flashes that force me to dig in my heels. We go around like that for the first phase, just testing each other, and the buzzer sends me back to the vertex, where Stitchy clamps the chargers on my fists and checks my heart-rate.

"Every-ting okiday, Red?"

He means my armor. The toggles are working fine. Somewhere, Dransa's doing her job. Dransa. She'd probably break my nose for calling her that.

"Don't get hit," says Cus.

The second phase, Tull lets me know it's for real. He starts with a wheymaker that I barely get under, clipping the top of my headgear. Then he catches me with a repulsor clicker to the chinguard that almost takes me off my feet. The stars I see are at war. I cover up and green him back, almost get him against the shockwire, but it

changes and he comes back with the same flurry he put on for the crowd. He numbs my right arm, but I put an end to it with an ion straight that sends lightning arcing across his chest and makes his hub shield blink. He backs off, giving me time to shake the stars away. He's strong.

Still no problems with the mitts by the fourth phase, and while I'm charging in my vertex I see a lot of angry faces at Vorne's table. Tull's confused too. They didn't plan on me going this long. I see the Defel from earlier leave Vorne's table with a couple of thugs. I hope Derlin's got somebody watching Dansra. Stitchy shows me the point register after the fifth; I'm ahead.

One of Vorne's men gives Tull and his Arconan a real earful. The big lizard comes in hard and fast in the sixth, punishing me with staggering repulsor and stunner blows to the head. Not even bothering with the hub-busters now, he's got orders to do his job the old fashioned way. I taste blood that phase.

Somewhere in the seventh he catches me on the shockwire and shuts down my mitts with ions for a good ten seconds, long enough to get my legs wobbling. I only know because I see the holoreplay later. I don't remember any of it.

Eighth phase and Stitchy's spluttering like a faulty motivator. He shakes his head a lot. He argues with Cus, points to his datapad. I tell him I'll come after him next if he stops the fight. I don't know if he understands me, but the buzzer sounds and Cus pulls the stool away, almost dumping me on my red rear. Tull punishes me for two and a half minutes.

The ninth is a world of pain and blue-green lights. Tull's a black and red blur. Then I'm on my hands and knees watching my own blood spotting the Tuffweave. The Rodian's voice is counting. Since I can't understand him I forego the downtime and get right back up. Tull puts me down again, good naturedly.

Catch your breath, redssskin.

The buzzer cuts off the Rodian's count. I lean on Cus all the way back to the vertex.

Tenth and last phase. My head feels like it's on a flexicoil. I see flashes of Cus' pachyderm face, hear snatches of Stitchy's worried gibbering. Moff Ammar's lighting an afterdinner cigarra. No wonder he needs my lungs.

Across the way, Tull sags in his own vertex. It feels like I'm getting killed, but I must've done some damage. There's a brand new gap in his pointy grin. His pretty red armor is scuffed and dented, the primer showing gray beneath.

They march us out to the center. We touch shockmitts. Tull hisses something at me. Doesn't anybody speak Basic?

Cus tells me on the walk back,

"This is it, kid." Is there something in his throat?

"Yeah," I manage.

I turn to face this monster one more time. He's a shining pillar of darkness, stitched out of solid black leather. I look past him at the real monster. Torne looks put out and Moff Ammar's giving him a sour glare. All I have to do is live through this phase and he's done.

Then I hear it.

Way up in the nosebleed seats, where they've opened the vent shutters to cool the place despite the murderous air and the hard rain outside, where the fans have to pack masks or permanently damage themselves sitting through an hourlong contest, they're calling a name, and it isn't Tull Raine's.

It's mine.

Then I remember. I'm not fighting for the purse or the sash, I'm fighting for those sickly kids who braved a run in killer rain to show me they had my back. Whether it was all just a publicity stunt of Derlin's doesn't matter any more. When this fight's over, it's all over. The slums, the orphans on the street, the slime, the smog, it all goes away.

What'd Derlin say? *We wanna make you a hero, kid.*

Heroes don't die. Well, maybe sometimes, but not like this.

It's the Reussi up there cheering, stamping their feet and chanting, "*Lo-bar! Lo-bar! Lo-bar!*"

The swells are turning in their seats and squinting up into the shadows.

I never got the chance to fight the T'Syriél with my father. Never fought the Empire, either. But I know about the battle madness, what my people call the *ryastraad*. When we're up against the wall, sometimes something takes over, makes us into more than we are.

My whole skeleton is charged. My muscles constrict. I feel like I could throw off my shockmitts and batter Tull to paste. My legs have been gone. I've hardly felt them the last three phases, but now they catapult me the length of the wedge even as the buzzer's sounding. I don't even see Tull. I see a black wall I have to tear down to get at something precious on the other side.

My heart's like a battery, charging up my arms, sending them out and snapping them back like chains of white lightning. I'm aware of pulses of blue from Tull dancing on my armor, making it seize up. I fight past it. His mitts go green and I match him and batter down his guard. My shoulder joints won't move. I force them. My head is swimming in molten iron. I can't think, just react, and force reaction.



When I come out of it, I see Tull dancing on the shockwire. I see his hub shield go black. My left shoots forward like a speedertrain, and his hub explodes in a spray of sparks along with the emitters on my mitt. Most of the bones in my hand shatter. The blow drives him in between the bouncewires. He goes tumbling out of the wedge and lands on one of the pricey tables, shattering glasses and dinnerware, sending food and swells flying. I almost go with him. I grab the vertex post and totter there.

It's Torel Vorne's table and I'm serving Barabel. Vorne's standing there trembling, his suit spackled with micromite pâté. Moff Ammar's flat on his back, spluttering through a busted cigarra.

I look right into Torel Vorne's eyes... and I laugh through the blood, through the count.

I reel backwards as the buzzer sounds. Tull's moving, but not to stand. Stitchy catches me and I almost crush him. I fall into Cus' arms. The Rodian grabs my wrist and I almost send him to the floor. He tries again and raises it up. He says my name -- it's the first thing he's said I've understood all night. The Dool Arena erupts and the holocam droids' flashcubes pop off like a firing squad all around me. Cus keeps me up while Stitchy puts the glittering sash over my dead shoulder.

Tull's helped to his feet by his MD and the Arconan. Vorne, Moff Ammar, and the swells are gone.

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Two weeks later I get a holomessage from Colonel Derlin. He's in a spiffy uniform. He tells me Dransa had her own fight going out-slicing Vorne's man. He says they traced her signal and that the big Reussi, Tisocco, got a hole burned through his shoulder by the Defel they sent after her.

He doesn't say what happened to the Defel.

Otherwise, he tells me, everything went off without a hitch. The New Republic suspended the Reussi Corporations' license to operate pending judiciary investigation, and Vorne's running like a scared jakrab from an arrest warrant and three or four bounties. The Republic's taken over governing Reuss VIII and is "actively pursuing a plan to return the planet to its agricultural roots."

Mygo's heading the children's relief effort. I donated the purse from the Raine fight for the Rust Rats. It just about killed Cus and Stitchy, but it's not like the endorsements don't pay enough. Hell, Cus signed a deal that got my name slapped on next year's luxury speedertruck from Zzip -- the '42-Aybock Ion.'

I wonder how Dransa would like one?

Lobar "Ion Fist" Aybock holds both the Outer and Mid Rim Ponderweight Division Shockboxing sashes and is the ranked one contender for the Pangalactic Championship scheduled next year. Originally hailing from the remote planet Shiva IV, he calls Chandrila home.

Be sure to purchase Fists Of Ion: Memoirs Of A Champion Shockboxer this month at Qee-Zutton Booksellers or wherever fine reading material are downloaded.